Minoritised British applicants' experiences and perspectives on applying to a targeted, funded doctoral scheme

A report published as a result of interviews undertaken with applicants to one of YCEDE's scholarship schemes. Participants were asked about their experiences of the recruitment and selection process at York during interviews conducted before they were informed of the outcome of their application.

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YCEDE cannot guarantee that all information contained in this resource is accurate at the time of reading, particularly with regard to dates, deadlines, and funding availability.

Suggested Audience: Staff
Suggested Sub-Audience: PGR Recruitment & Selection

This resource is intended for use in improving equity and outcomes for ethnically minoritised individuals interested in doctoral study or careers in research.
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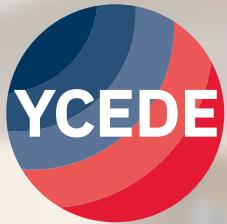
YCEDE | **Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education**

Minoritised British applicants' experiences and perspectives on applying to a targeted, funded doctoral scheme

Bukola Oyinloye

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Barriers to doctoral representation have been attributed to systemic barriers (societal, sectoral and institutional), opacity of admissions (and selection) processes, lack of disaggregated data and Whiteness in the HE environment (e.g., predominantly White academic staff, Eurocentric syllabus or curriculum, etc.) (UKRI & RE, 2019). Concerns around opacity in admissions include what occurs prior to admissions, including the pre-application doctoral communications prospective applicants engage in with academic or non-academic staff in person, online, at conferences or events, or the information gleaned through institutional websites (Burford et al., 2023). Applicants, however, seek information beyond what is gleaned from supervisors or supervisory staff. They also explore information videos on social media (Burford et al., 2023) and seek information or resources to support the actual completion of their application.

This study provides **insight into the doctoral information-seeking processes** – searching for or finding required information from information sources (Chatterjee, 2017) about the doctorate and/ or to support the doctoral application process prior to enrolment – undertaken by underrepresented doctoral applicants, through the perspectives of **self-identifying Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic applicants to the ring-fenced York Graduate Research School (YGRS) PhD scholarships** for 2024/2025. The study is particularly unique as it explores the unheard voices of those who are not currently enrolled in a doctoral programme. A qualitative approach was adopted and data were generated from semi-structured interviews

with eight applicants prior to the receipt of their shortlisting outcomes to explore their perspectives independent of these outcomes. Seven women and one man were interviewed. Seven were from the Social Sciences, and seven had Master's degrees. One applicant was a repeat applicant, while three others had applied to other ring-fenced scholarship schemes at other institutions. A qualitative coding analytical approach (Saldaña, 2021) was used to generate codes and categories. Given the opportunity to engage with this group, the study also explored views on the underapplication of minoritised applicants in general. Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the University of York's Department of Education Ethics Committee.

Findings around application were categorised into motivations for the PhD and YGRS PhD scholarship; discovery of the scholarship; preparation of the application; and post-application communications. **Applicants' motivations for a PhD** included desires for advanced higher education, national or policy-level impact, and evidence-informed advocacy against racial inequities. Three applicants with recently obtained refugee status particularly desired to gain further skills to enable them to integrate into British society and also contribute to their countries of origin. The two oldest applicants were particularly motivated by considerations of racial equity. Motivations for the scholarship were, unsurprisingly, around funding, although some were also attracted by place (affinity to York, and commutability to current residence).

Applicants discovered the scholarship primarily through website searches, though the specific websites searched were often influenced by an existing relationship or connection to the university, as seen through the refugee applicants who had

completed their Master's at York. One applicant learned about the scholarship from a former PhD supervisor while others found out through social media, e.g., an existing WhatsApp network or LinkedIn. Inquiries about eligibility were made to the YGRS team by applicants who were unsure of their eligibility for home fee status or their ethnicity. One applicant experienced scrutiny of her eligibility at the departmental level while another reported administrative queries about her eligibility. Eligibility inquiries constituted part of applicants' doctoral information-seeking and formed decisions to apply. The YGRS scholarship step-by-step guide was well used, while the webinar was attended by most applicants interviewed.

Preparing the application including searching and engaging with prospective supervisors, and **applicants recorded varying levels of ease**. One applicant did not conduct a search due to time constraints, while the three with a York Master's appeared to have had the greatest ease. Two of the other four applicants received a positive response to requests for supervision or were connected to an academic who positively responded. One of the remaining two received no response from seven or eight prospective supervisors contacted while another declined the request reportedly due to lack of supervision capacity. The other of the remaining two, being on her third application, had found no supervisor on her first and, on her second, was connected with a Black female academic by a US-based academic.

Regarding engagement, the three York Master's and the repeat applicant received the greatest support for their research proposal. One of the York Master's applicants received particularly significant support, including from a second supervisor. The two mature applicants reportedly received support from minoritised academics, one of whom was an external, non-York male Black academic. Both applicants reported feeling safe and supported due to these academics' ethnic backgrounds and perceived associated relationality.

Most applicants' **ability to access academic resources for their research proposals was fraught**. Except one applicant who was still a registered student and therefore had access to her institutional library, others relied on resources already downloaded from their Master's (where relevant to the proposal), supervisors (who

downloaded materials or shared their publications), friends' university library access or, in the case of one of the mature applicants, a previous employer's database subscription. The more mature applicants also experienced constraints with the synchronous application form. Two applicants, including the repeat applicant, highlighted the need for meaningful post-application feedback for unsuccessful applicants. Ultimately, only one of the interviewed applicants was awarded a YGRS PhD scholarship: one of the former York Master's student who received significant feedback, including from a second supervisor.

Participants' perspectives on underapplication included compounded societal inequality, due to systemic racism. They also highlighted lack of knowledge around available opportunities and the PhD's potential for impact. Others highlighted the paucity of minoritised academics and the associated lack of visible representation as a constraint to minoritised doctoral aspirations. Finally, particularly for the refugee applicants who had been previously denied formal education, a lack of eagerness to learn resulted in under-aspiration and underapplication, albeit these were acknowledged to be tempered by personal and other life circumstances.

This study's insights show that **doctoral information-seeking** involves not only communications with staff at target doctoral institutions, but also with willing academics at non-target institutions, as well as information-seeking outside of engagement with target institution staff to inform research proposals or complete different elements of application forms. The findings highlight the criticality of connectedness, be this directly to the information sought or indirectly to a person who may provide such information. Importantly, **the study highlights the affective dimensions of doctoral information-seeking**, particularly with minoritised academic staff with whom minoritised applicants feel safe and by whom they feel particularly supported. Finally, **the study highlights the vital importance of post-application doctoral communications** as a potential way to narrow the cultural (and possibly) social capital gap, particularly for applicants who continue to be underrepresented in the doctorate. The report concludes with recommendations for scholarship schemes targeted at minoritised doctoral applicants, which are also relevant for non-funded and non-targeted doctoral application processes.

INTRODUCTION

Barriers to doctoral representation have been attributed to systemic barriers (societal, sectoral and institutional), opacity of admissions (and selection) processes, lack of disaggregated data and the predominance of Whiteness in the higher education environment (e.g., through lack of diversity in academic staff composition, Eurocentric syllabus or curriculum, etc.) (UKRI & RE, 2019). Concerns around opacity in admissions in particular include concerns around what occurs prior to admissions, especially in the interaction between academic and or professional doctoral staff on one hand, and prospective doctoral applicants on the other. These interactions constitute what some have termed pre-application doctoral communications (PADC) or the "communications that potential doctoral applicants engage in with university staff prior to making a formal application to study," including communications with both academic and non-academic staff in person, online or at conferences or events, and information on institutional websites (Burford et al., 2023, p. 10).

Echoing these concerns, Henderson et al. (2023) illustrate evidence from a research intensive British higher education institution where some prospective supervisors employed the pre-application communications stage to screen out the inquiries of prospective applicants perceived to offer low supervisability (i.e. supervision-conducive personal and interpersonal attributes and doctoral attributes such as knowledge, skills, experience, etc.) and low 'fundability' (i.e., capacity to meet criteria of competitive scholarship schemes). Importantly, in addition to communicating with prospective supervisors and non-academic staff, applicants seek other information to support their doctoral application, including doctoral information videos on social media (Burford et al., 2023), which may be particularly important for underrepresented applicants who have limited other means of accessing such information.

This study contributes to the literature on doctoral admissions by providing insights on PADC and other doctoral information-seeking processes undertaken by underrepresented doctoral applicants. Drawing on ideas around information-seeking – the process of searching for or finding required information from information sources (Chatterjee, 2017) – doctoral information-seeking is here conceived as the process of searching for information to gain insight into the doctorate and/or support the doctoral application process prior to enrolment in a doctoral programme. This includes but goes beyond the PADC. The study focuses on the application experiences of minoritised British doctoral applicants to a targeted doctoral scholarship scheme and is the first to explore the perspectives of minoritised applicants (including those with refugee status) who have yet to become

candidates. Unlike other studies, it makes visible the perspectives of those who remain excluded (at least at the time of the study). The study is conducted by the Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education (YCEDE) project, one of the 13 Office for Students and Research England funded projects implementing interventions to improve the access and participation of British minority ethnic PGR students across various disciplines, in collaboration with the York Graduate Research School (YGRS). Since 2022/23, the YGRS has offered targeted doctoral scholarships for UK-domiciled candidates who self-identify as Black, Asian or Minority ethnic. This study aims to understand applicants' experiences prior to and during their application to the scholarship scheme in the 2024 application period, with the overall aim of drawing lessons to inform future iterations of the scheme and specific objectives to:

1. Understand the motivations of minoritised British applicants for the PhD in general, and to the YGRS doctoral scholarship scheme specifically

2. Examine how applicants discovered the scholarship scheme and what influenced their decision to apply

3. Explore how applicants engaged in pre-application doctoral communications and sought other information to complete their applications to the YGRS scholarship

4. Understand what occurred in the scholarship post-application period

5. Explore participants' broader perspectives around the under-application of minoritised persons to the doctorate

According to the YGRS website, each scholarship provided:

a. UK (home)-rate tuition fees for 3 years

b. A UKRI-aligned stipend for 3.5 years, full time (£18,622 per year tax-free in 2023/24)

c. An annual (for 3 years) research training support grant budget of either:

d. £5k (for a lab- or field-based programme), or

e. £2k (for a non-lab-based programme)

f. Coaching, mentoring and advocacy.

For the academic year 2024/25, the YGRS advertised up to six scholarships. However, due to financial constraints, three PhD and one Master's by Research scholarships were awarded at the end of the recruitment process. The scholarship website included information such as the eligibility criteria; a detailed step-by-step guide; and a summary of how award decisions are made, including a link to the criteria for shortlisting and final awarding decisions. The application deadline was Friday, April 5, 2024 at 11.59pm BST, with two webinars held in February and March to provide an overview of the scheme and answer prospective applicants' questions. Each webinar was structured into a presentation about the scholarships by the Dean of the Graduate Research School; a panel discussion with current scholarship holders; and a Q&A featuring questions sent in advance by participants (through webinar registration forms) and during the webinar itself. Due to time constraints during the webinar, responses to unanswered questions from registration forms were promised to be collated and sent to participants after the webinar.

METHODOLOGY

The study was primarily qualitative, using semi-structured interviews, to enable participants to speak in depth about their experiences applying to the YGRS scholarship, and to a lesser extent, other similarly targeted schemes. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of York's Department of Education Ethics Committee. Twenty-eight applicants were eligible to participate while eight applicants were eventually interviewed out of seventeen who initially expressed interest. Pre-interview communications with interested applicants stressed the independence of the study team from the scholarship committee. An interview guide was shared with participants beforehand. It included questions about applicants' motivation for the PhD; how they learned about the scholarship; their supervisor search process and outcomes; engagement with supervisor in relation to their proposal; sources used in preparation of their application and proposal; perceptions of the application form; engagement with YGRS team; views on the application processes of other scholarship schemes; and perspectives on the low numbers of doctoral applications from minoritised applicants. Interviews were conducted online using Zoom, with transcripts automatically generated and reviewed thereafter. To ensure trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004), participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts. Table 1 presents the applicants. Although all except two applicants chose to use their real names in the study; however, given the prevailing social climate around diversity, equity and inclusion, no participant name is used. Rather, participants are identified in the order in which they were interviewed.

Table 1 Applicants' demographic information, disciple, highest qualification and previous experience in applying for PhD funding

Participant	Ethnicity	Gender	Faculty	Master's	Previous YGRS app* (#)	Other previous 'BAME' PhDs sch* apps (#)	Other sch* apps 2023 / 2024 (#)
Applicant 1	White European	Woman	SS*	Yes	No	Yes (1)	No
Applicant 2	Asian Other	Man	SS	Yes	No**	Yes (5)	Yes (4)
Applicant 3	Asian Other	Woman	SS	Yes	Yes (2)	Yes (5)	Yes (3)
Applicant 4	Black British - Caribbean	Woman	SS	Yes	No	No	No
Applicant 5	Asian British - Pakistani	Woman	A&H	Yes	No	No	No
Applicant 6	Black British – Caribbean	Woman	SS	No	No	Yes (1)	Yes (3)
Applicant 7	Asian Other	Woman	SS	Yes	No	No	No
Applicant 8	Asian Other	Woman	SS	Yes	No	No	No

*app = application; sch = scholarship; SS = Social Sciences; A&H = Arts & Humanities

**Applicant 2 reportedly applied to YGRS in 2023; however, his data was not found in the record of previous applicants.

Although the interviewed applicants were primarily from the Social Sciences, there was greater disciplinary spread among the seventeen who initially expressed interest whose disciplinary backgrounds reflected the wider applicant pool. This suggests that issues of availability and unawareness of emails were likely contributors to the attrition of interested applicants from other disciplinary backgrounds. Moreover, the time commitment for interview-based qualitative research may mean that such selection bias may be inevitable (e.g., Florczak, 2022). A qualitative coding analytical approach (Saldaña, 2021) was used to generate codes and categories from the data. This was done on word processing software to prevent over-coding (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). In total, some 252 inductive and deductive codes were generated, with the deductive codes informed by ideas of PADC and information-seeking activities. Some 227 of these codes generated four broad categories, while the other 25 were categorised separately as they related to participants' ideas around underapplication.
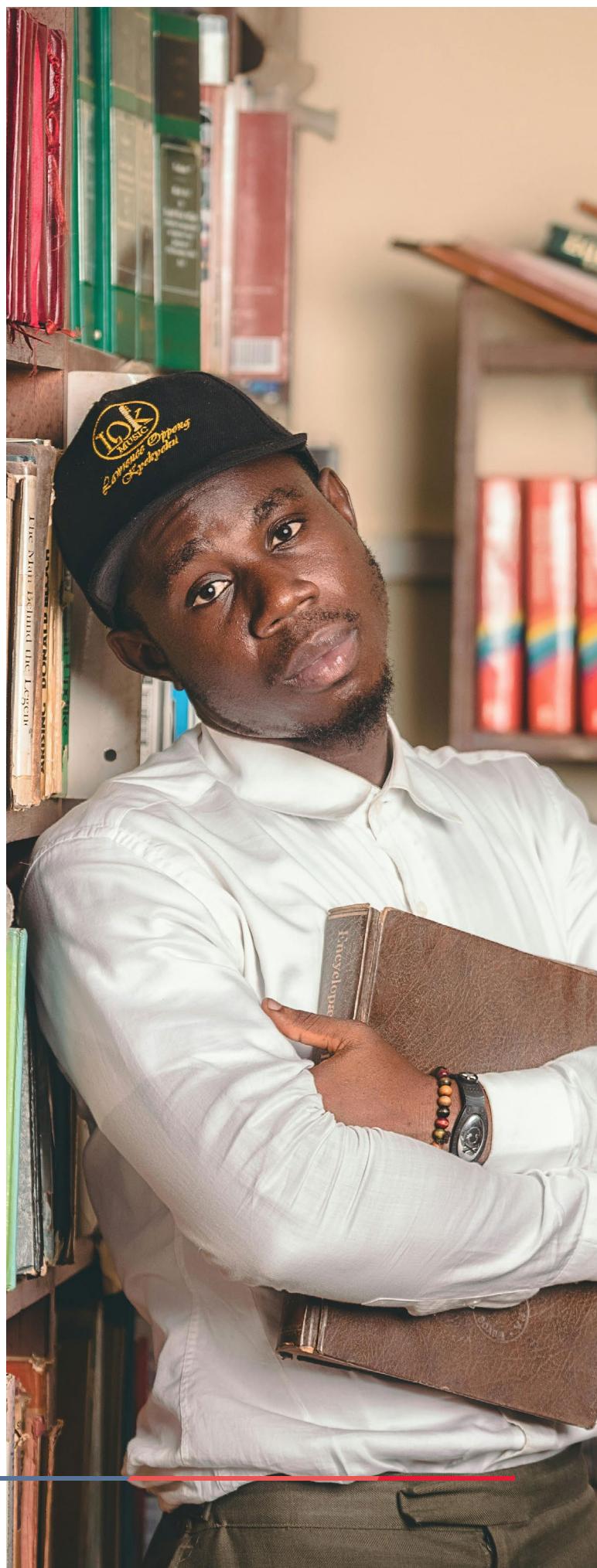
FINDINGS

The findings are presented as categories drawn from some of the areas explored during the interviews, and informed by the literature. These are motivations for the PhD; discovering the YGRS scholarship; preparing the application; and post-application communications.

Motivations for the PhD and for the YGRS scholarship

Applicants had varying motivations for pursuing a PhD ranging from desires for advanced higher education degrees to national or policy-level impact and evidence-informed advocacy against racial inequities. Three applicants who were recently awarded refugee status were particularly desirous of gaining further skills to enable them to integrate into British society while also contributing to their countries of origin (Applicants 2, 7, and 8). The two oldest applicants, Applicants 3 and 4, were particularly motivated by considerations of racial equity. Motivations for the scholarship were unsurprisingly around funding, although some were also attracted by place (affinity to York, and relative proximity to current residence).

Discovering the YGRS scholarship

Applicants learned about the YGRS scholarship primarily through website searches, though the specific websites searched were often influenced by some existing relationship or connection to the university of York, particularly the three refugee applicants who had completed their Master's at York. One of the other applicants, a former part time PhD student who dropped out due to study and full-time workload management challenges, found out from her former PhD supervisor while others found out through social media, e.g., an existing WhatsApp network or LinkedIn connection.

Inquiries about eligibility were made to the YGRS team by various applicants, including those with refugee status (to enquire about their eligibility for home fee status) and those whose ethnicities were not explicitly stated on the application form or on the website. Applicant 3 experienced scrutiny of her eligibility at the departmental level and perceived that the web-based information insufficient to meet her needs as a more mature applicant. A repeat applicant, her challenging experiences with institutional pre-applications communications, among others, formed her decision that this will be her last YGRS application attempt. Another applicant (Applicant 7) one of the refugee applicants, had her eligibility scrutinised by a YGRS team member.

Eligibility inquiries were part of applicants' wider information-seeking processes and formed part of their decisions to apply. Other information sources at the decision stage included the step-by-step guide on the YGRS website, which was used by all but one applicant, and the webinar, which was attended by five applicants. Those who didn't attend either found out too late (Applicant 6), didn't receive the link as requested (Applicant 7), or were not particularly interested (Applicant 8).

Preparing the application

Applicants recorded varying levels of ease in finding prospective supervisors for their work, except Applicant 6 who did not have time to conduct a supervisor search. The three recently awarded refugee applicants appeared to have had the greatest ease finding supervisors due to their relatively recent connections with York academics through recent completions of a Master's degree at the university. Two proposed supervisors were lecturers from applicants' Master's programmes while one was an academic met at a lecture during the applicant's Master's. The four remaining applicants searched through the university web pages and only two yielded a positive result this way (Applicants 1 and 4). Nearly all the supervisors contacted by Applicant 5 did not respond (the one who did had no capacity for supervision) and for Applicant 3 who was on her third application attempt, none of the supervisors responded her first time. For her second attempt, she found a match through a connection with a US based academic and proposed this supervisor (a Black female academic) during her second and (current) third attempt.

Finding a positive match was one thing, engaging with them for support on the required research proposal was another. The three who completed their Master's at York were amongst those who received the most feedback on their proposals, with Applicant 8 receiving the greatest level of feedback of all interviewed. Applicant 3 also received significant feedback albeit as a third time applicant, the proposal was recycled from the second attempt. Applicant 4 received feedback from her prospective supervisor but received, according to her, even more helpful feedback from a Black British African academic from LinkedIn with whom she felt she could have a 'safe space' to discuss. Like Applicant 4, Applicant 3 found her recommended Black female academic 'so, so helpful' and noted feeling 'really supported' because of the academic's minoritised ethnicity. Applicant 1 received no further engagement from her proposed supervisor beyond the initial agreement to supervise while Applicant 5 had to make do with one round of feedback from her former PhD supervisor.

In addition to feedback on the research proposal, few applicants highlighted supervisors' other efforts to support them. This included advocacy, e.g., emailing YGRS to inquire about applicant eligibility (Applicant 8), and psychosocial support, e.g., after applicants' previous negative shortlisting outcome (Applicant 3). Apart from engagement with prospective supervisors, applicants highlighted the ways in which they obtained academic sources to support their research proposal. Except Applicant 6, no other applicant was registered at university at the time of their application; thus, they needed to find creative ways to obtain paywalled academic literature. Those who were recent Master's students relied on sources from their studies – as topics were largely related to their Master's interests – and from friends still registered at their former university. Others used available online open access resources, organisational reports (where relevant), sources shared or written by supervisors and, in the case of Applicant 4, access to an academic database enabled by her most recent employer. For Applicants 2 and 5, it was even necessary to purchase some resources.

Most participants thought the application form was lengthy but simultaneously valued the opportunity to share different dimensions of themselves through the ability to include details about their background and other life experiences. This was particularly highlighted as a positive feature of the York application form by the four applicants who had applied to other schemes. Applicant 6, for instance, noted that although it was a "big form", the questions were "really good" because they "speak to the fact that the person is more than just one dimension." One mature applicant, however, found the synchronicity of the Google form unwieldly while another found the embedded research proposal and 2,500-character count unorthodox.

Post-application communications

Applicants reported receiving an acknowledgement of the receipt of their application. However, three applicants noted the usefulness of a more specific timeline of the shortlisting and awarding decisions, while one of the three (Applicant 2) and another applicant (Applicant 3) highlighted the importance of feedback. Applicant 2's perspective was shaped by his departmental application experience while Applicant 3's was formed by her previous YGRS attempts for which she felt she had not received sufficiently constructive feedback. No other applicant discussed a

need for feedback, although it is important to note that the interviews occurred prior to any decision-making point; as such, it is possible that others may have shared similar views around feedback if the interviews had been conducted after the shortlisting process.

Table 2 outlines some of the key findings of the study, and indicates each participant's shortlisting outcome and awarding decision. As can be seen, the only study participant to receive a doctoral award was Applicant 8: the former York Master's student who received the greatest level of feedback.

Table 2 Summary findings and 2024/25 scholarship outcomes

Participant	Discovery of YGRS	Used YGRS guide	Attended webinar	Found supervisor	Level York supervisor feedback on RP*	Shortlisted	Awarded
Applicant 1	Email/website	No	Yes	Yes	None	No	No
Applicant 2	York website	Yes	Yes	Yes	Moderate	No	No
Applicant 3	Whatsapp	Yes	Yes	Yes [1st time, no; 2nd time, yes]	High	No	No
Applicant 4	LinkedIn	Yes	Yes	Yes	Low	No	No
Applicant 5	York website (suggested by former supervisor)	Yes	Yes	No	None**	Yes	No
Applicant 6	General web search	Yes	Yes	No (no time to find)	None	No	No
Applicant 7	York website	Yes	No	Yes	High	No	No
Applicant 8	York website	Yes	No	Yes	Very high	Yes	Yes

*This is based on feedback from prospective supervisors at York though as already explained, other academics (within and outside York) also provided feedback. Based on a five-point scale: None, low, moderate, high, very high

**As noted, Applicant 5 used her previous doctoral proposal and received feedback once from her former supervisor

# Under-application to the doctorate

The study also engaged with this group of applicants to explore their perspectives on the under-application of minority ethnic British doctoral applicants. In line with the barriers identified earlier (UKRI & RE, 2019), applicants highlighted issues around societal racism and inequality, sector level inequality, research environment, and social and cultural capital. An additional issue, around personal life circumstances, was also identified.

Low applicant self-belief was generally attributed to systemic issues, albeit in different ways. Three applicants highlighted perceptions of the inability to secure funding due to feelings of inadequacy or not being good enough, which for at least one applicant was exacerbated by the often-limited scholarships on offer. Unsurprisingly, those who had previously failed to secure funding were particularly susceptible to demotivation and low self-belief. Notably, Applicant 3 highlighted the systemic effect of rejection whereby rejection in one domain, e.g., labour market, influences perceptions of inadequacy in others, e.g., postgraduate education.

Sector level inequality through limited availability of funding was mentioned by five applicants, and evident in the experience of a sixth. Existing loan options were deemed insufficient, and for one applicant, it was not just that minoritised applicants cannot afford the doctorate, they simply "cannot afford to think" about the doctorate and therefore may not form doctoral aspirations or even where they do, may not take steps to try to realise those aspirations.

Lack of knowledge was highlighted around two concerns. One was in relation to funding or other relevant opportunities such as the YGRS scholarship. The other was in relation to the transformative potential of a research career, i.e., research as a tool for social change, usually engendered by the completion of a doctorate. For example, Applicant 6's doctoral aspirations were formed when, through one of her lecturers, she began to understand the doctoral degree as something she could use to "transform the nation potentially...[to] used to have an impact."

For the two most mature applicants, the 'deep assumptions' held by minorities around their ability to secure opportunities were exacerbated by the absence of minoritised scholars in the academy. In Applicant 4's view, minoritised applicants were not
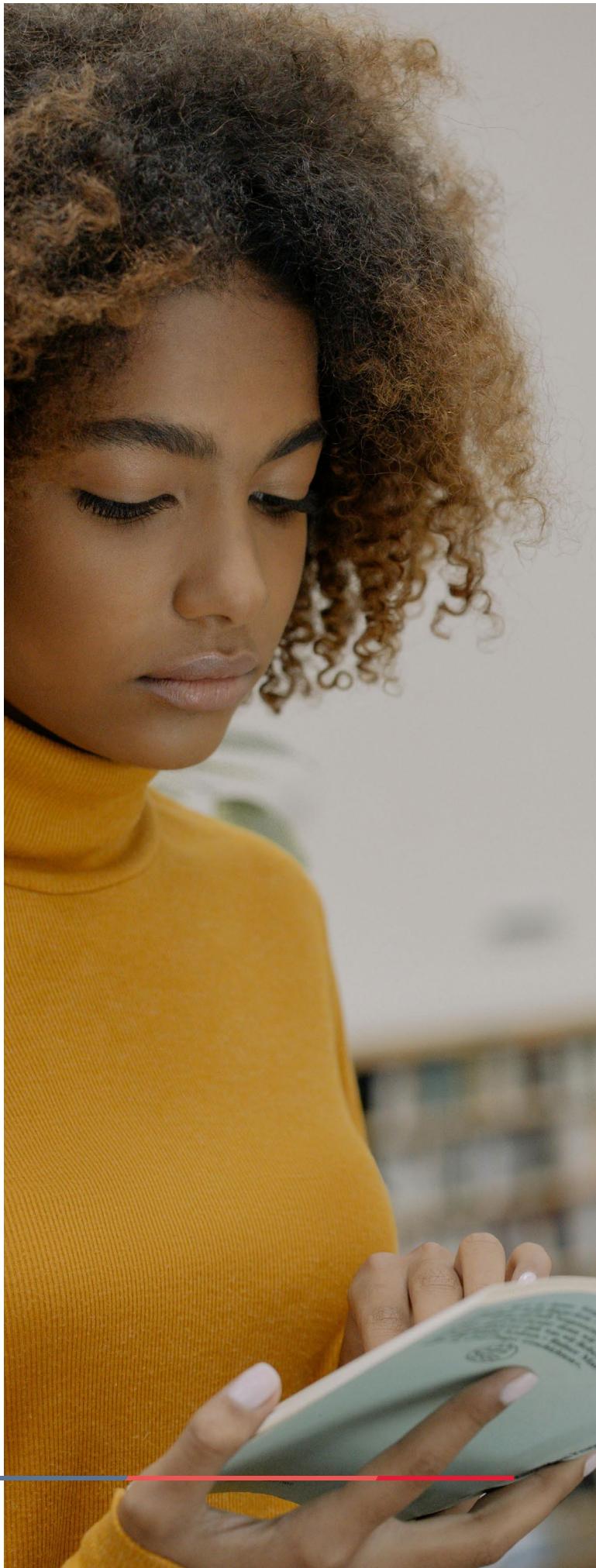
applying "because they don't see anybody that looks like themselves and they don't think they can do it… they're not going to feel, they're not going to believe, not gonna have confidence, not going to believe in themselves." In addition to representation as a contributor to the formation of doctoral aspirations, the findings suggest that perceptions of deeper relationality may also be at work in the desire for minoritised academics. This is evident from Applicants 3 and 4's particular feelings of safety and support from the minoritised academics with whom they engaged.

For applicants who have had significant barriers in accessing education, an eagerness to learn distinguishes those who form doctoral aspirations and then apply from those who do not. However, it was acknowledged that such eagerness may be ultimately mediated by personal life circumstances such as unaffordability (e.g., of self-funded PhDs), caring responsibilities, length of study time commitment, post-PhD labour market fears (or fear of leaving current employment), and limited interest in a research-based career.

Discussion

The study has provided in-depth insight into minoritised doctoral applicants' motivations and doctoral information-seeking activities. Unsurprisingly, applicants' motivations were informed by previous experiences and diverse commitments. The most mature applicants were particularly motivated by racial inequity, as shown through their motivations and perspectives on ethnic underrepresentation, while those with recently awarded refugee status were least reflective about issues of racial inequity. Such differences in racialised experiences (Islam et al., 2024) are due not only to race but likely also to intersectional characteristics including ethnic categorisation, religion, gender, age, length of domiciliary, nationality, skin colour (and other phenotypic traits), and religious clothing, among others. Maturity was also important in applicant's ease with the technology, underlying the need to develop application processes that are appropriate for applicants with diverse needs and capabilities.

While access to meaningful knowledge and information has been demonstrated as an important part of pre-application doctoral communications (Burford et al.,

2023), this study suggests that this may be highly contingent on existing connections with the target doctoral institution, be this through previous study (which typically enables connection to academics at the institution) or connection to academics who have colleagues at the institution. The ability to access knowledge and information also relates to academic resources, e.g., academic literature, books, etc., in addition to PADC. This is particularly critical where a research proposal is a requirement. In this study, this ability was shown to be contingent not on an existing relationship with the target institution per se but rather on a relationship or connection with an institution or persons within applicants' social network who may directly provide the information or connect applicants with the information source. Notably, the study has shown that inconsistencies in communications at different levels within target institutions (e.g., between central admission and departments or schools) may constitute real constraints to applicants' ability to access meaningful knowledge and information.

Critically, the study has highlighted the constraints presented by lack of substantive post-applications doctoral communications, particularly in the form of constructive feedback to unsuccessful applicants. While 'substantive' constructive feedback may prove challenging for high-volume competitive scholarship schemes, this finding underscores the need for constructive post-application feedback for underrepresented, minoritised ethnic doctoral applicants, particularly in targeted scholarship schemes seeking to address inequalities in access to postgraduate research degrees. The notion of post-applications communications, moreover, also expands the concept of doctoral information-seeking to include information gleaned by unsuccessful applicants' which may inform subsequent applications.

Finally, the study has highlighted applicants' perceptions of the persistence of structural issues in doctoral information-seeking and the formation of doctoral aspirations, albeit limitations around cultural capital (e.g., access to knowledge about funding or the doctorate) were also prominent. However, the findings also suggest that a lack of social capital (i.e., connection with others in the network of higher and doctoral education) further deepens the cultural capital gap.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided important insight into doctoral admissions by illuminating the minoritised doctoral applicant journey, particularly through their doctoral information seeking efforts. It has shown that pre-application activities involve not only communications with staff at target doctoral institutions, they also include communications with willing academics at non-target institutions and information-seeking outside of engagement with target institution staff to inform research proposals or complete other parts of the application package. The study has highlighted the affective dimensions of pre-application communications and the act of completing a doctoral application form. For the latter, applicants were shown to value application forms which engages with them as a 'whole person' and not just an 'applicant' while desiring those which better attend to the needs of mature and or neurodiverse applicants. Finally, the study has highlighted the particular importance of post-application doctoral communications as a potential way to narrow the cultural (and possibly) social capital gap, particularly for applicants who continue to be underrepresented in the doctorate.

Drawing on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for scholarship schemes targeted for minoritised doctoral applicants though they are also applicable for non-targeted and non-funded doctoral application processes. A comprehensive list of recommendations relating specifically to pre-application doctoral communications may be found in Burford et al. (2023).

Advertisement

1. Communicate scholarships at department or school levels (and connect applicants with relevant departmental staff, where needed).

2. Encourage academics to include, on their profile, statement of willingness to supervise diverse PhD students and to indicate current capacity to supervise.

Application and supervisor engagement

3. Provide alternative means of communication, e.g., phone number, during the application period which may be active during specific hours during the day.

4. Consider providing applicants with access to university library for a certain period leading up to the application deadline.

5. Offer meaningful individual support to applicants to find and engage with relevant supervisors – dedicate appropriate resources to this, if required. Additional group-level support may be provided through webinars or a written guide dedicated to finding supervisors. Consider not making award decisions based on [in]ability to find a supervisor at the time of the application. Support awarded applicants to find supervisors if they have not been able to at the time of award.
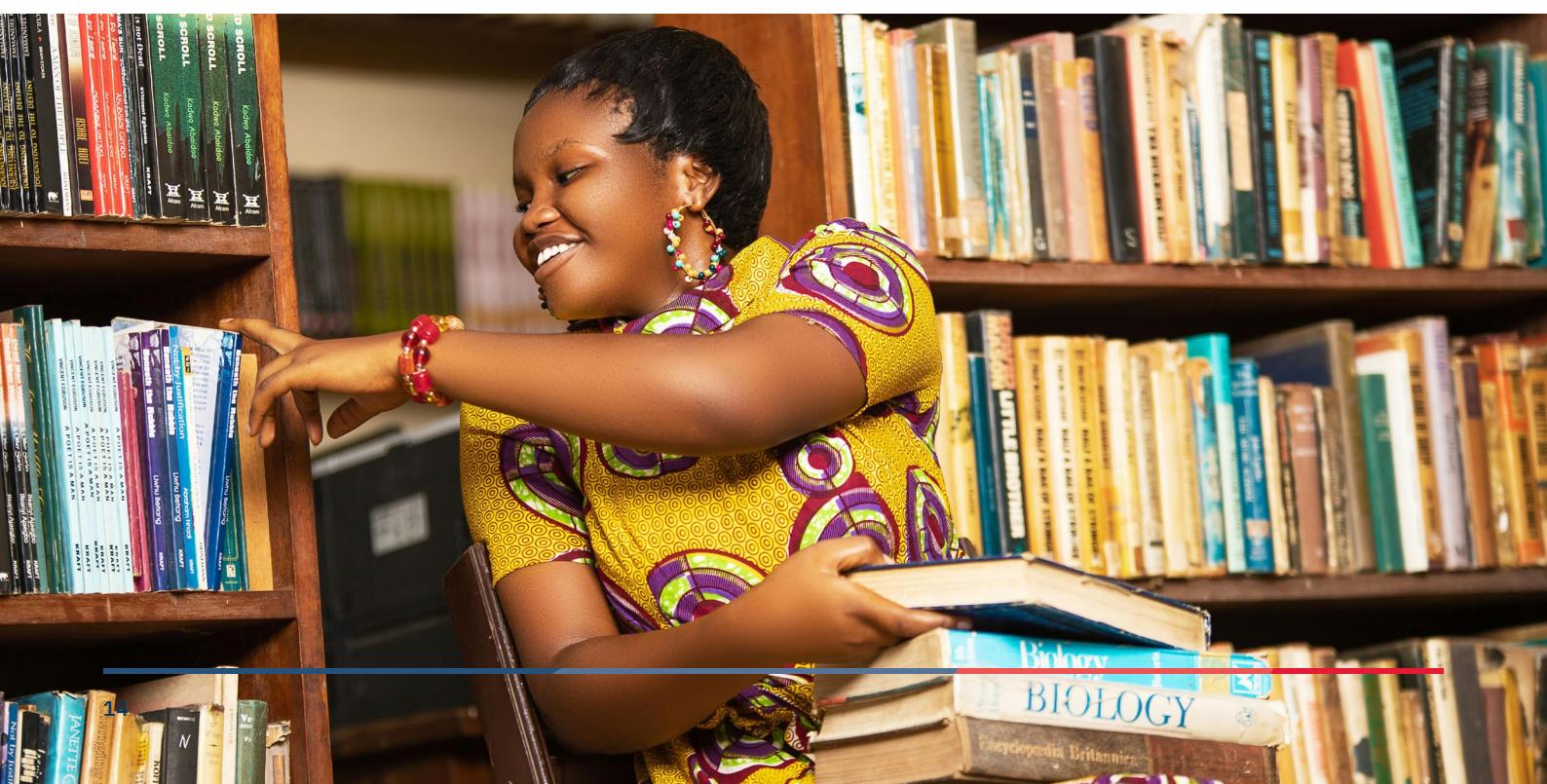
6. Where synchronous application [plat]forms are used, provide alternative, asynchronous options for submitting the application form (e.g., Word document) for those who may require it.

Post application communications

7. As part of acknowledgment of receipt of application, provide estimated timeline of shortlisting and awarding decisions (may also send email to all applicants immediately after the deadline).

8. Provide constructive feedback to shortlisted but not awarded applicants. Depending on application volume, provide constructive feedback to non-shortlisted applicants.

9. In addition to constructive feedback, signpost unsuccessful applicants to additional resources, welcome re-application (if the scheme will run again), and offer any available additional support.

Administration / Assessment

10. Diversify scholarship advertisement channels beyond traditional media like LinkedIn or Twitter, consider 'mainstream' job advertisement platforms such as Indeed, Monster, CharityJob, etc.

11. Provide unconscious bias to scholarship administration staff and scholarship assessors at the beginning of each application period.

12. Consider not making award decisions based on [in]ability to find a supervisor at the time of the application. Support awarded applicants to find supervisors if they have not been able to at the time of award.

13. Given certainty that a scholarship scheme will run again, retain any guides, resources or information on scholarship website for early doctoral information seekers, with a caveat that these may be updated once the application period officially opens.

14. Given significant inequities in supervisor feedback for the research proposal, consider alternative means of assessing the independence of applicants' research proposals, e.g., 100- or 200-word written summaries on interview day (with alternative arrangements for those who require it).

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